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ABSTRACT

The formation of a doctoral dissertation support group can prevent feelings of being overwhelmed and offer valuable material and strategic resources for those pursuing an advanced degree. Doctoral programs are designed for students to collaboratively create a professional product--a dissertation--making use of their dissertation committees' expertise and advice. In the spirit of collaborative/collegial work, a dissertation support group can offer systematic assistance to fellow graduate students (beyond their supervising committees' input) by aiding them in remaining mentally focused and physically on task. This article describes the structure and activities of a successful dissertation support group organized by doctoral students in the Educational Leadership Department at Western Michigan University. It is recommended that graduate students in similar circumstances recreate the Western Michigan University Model in their local context and advance a discussion to enhance the graduation of doctoral students in greater numbers from their chosen programs of studies. Contains a list of 10 "Articles of Understanding" for members in the dissertation support group. (LSR)

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From A.B.D. Status to Ed.D.: A Successful Dissertation Support Group

by

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INTRODUCTION

The arrival to doctoral candidacy status, familiarly known as "all but dissertation" (A.B.D.), is an exhilarating experience for virtually every doctoral student. However, initial euphoria quickly dissipates with increasing awareness that the demanding task of producing a five to six chapter dissertation lies ahead. Years of one's life can be -- and usually are as a rule -- dedicated to this task. Reasons for this include, first and most obvious, that doctoral programs are designed to culminate with a professional product collaboratively created between the student and his or her dissertation committee. This demands large time commitments from all involved. Yet, though a necessity, time is ironically a limited commodity for both the student and committee members. To complicate matters, working professionals attempting to earn an advanced degree are daily confronted with balancing existing/evolving job and family pressures. Faculty members, too, are engaged in activities such as research, publishing, teaching, consulting, and counseling multiple advisees against which the A.B.D. student must compete to secure sufficient time for dissertation assistance/advice.

From past experience, backup strategies which A.B.D. students exercise to cope with the dissertation writing process appear to involve: (a) consultation with other students further advanced in the process for expediency tips, and (b) reference back to popular books that outline the writing process providing ample "dos and don'ts". (Excellent examples of such "How to ..." books are cited in the reference listing on page 11).

The complex, oftentimes perplexing, and periodically frustrating task of earning a doctorate degree, however, need not be born alone. Doctoral students in the Educational Leadership Department at Western Michigan University made the task more manageable (and dare I say

"enjoyable") through membership in a dissertation support group. The collective pooling of material resources and articulation of common experiences aided the successful progress of all members toward graduation. In the spirit of, "Hindsight is 20-20", one newly graduated group member succinctly summed up the dissertation experience as: "You find a topic of interest about which you can collect data; then do it, analyze it, and write it up." Regretfully, such lucid insights are acquired only through the enviable completion of all dissertation requirements. Thus, for A.B.D. students now actively pursuing the dream of a doctorate degree, following below are descriptions of a successful dissertation support group's structure and members' experiences that better enabled certain of these A.B.D. graduate students' to complete their doctoral programs of studies.

GROUP STRUCTURE

Group members were recruited among doctoral students who had already finished a dissertation seminar class designed for students to produce a viable dissertation proposal. The dissertation study group first met in May 1995 in the library conference room on Western Michigan University's campus. At this meeting, the purpose of the dissertation support group was decided upon and articles of understanding (see Appendix 1) were presented and discussed. The group's purpose was simply stated as offering support to members toward the completion of their dissertations, oral defense, and graduation. Potential members were asked to consider the commitments inherent to the group's purpose as outlined in the articles of understanding, and then respond through electronic mail their agreement or not with the group's structure. Fortunately, all individuals present ultimately agreed with the terms of participation and ventured forward as partners into the common pursuit of an

approved dissertation.

While articles of understanding provided structure and guidance for the group's purpose, the effective functioning of the group actually centered upon adherence to several key activities. The most important of these proved to be: (a) sending weekly e-mail progress reports among all members, (b) sharing documents created for one's own research, (c) practicing one's dissertation defense before group members, and (d) celebrating group members' incremental victories along the path to graduation.

Weekly E-mail Reports

Weekly e-mail reports served as the primary means by which group members communicated their steady progress to one another. These reports enabled the reader to observe the requisite steps of members further along in their progress. Members' weekly reports discussing achieved program objectives inspired the work of others, and conversely, served to "red flag" members floundering with "writer's block" or other distractions causing conscious or unconscious delays. The cumulative knowledge gained from observing how others navigated through the dissertation process was truly invaluable toward streamlining one's concerted efforts.

Sharing Documents

E-mail served to maintain group members' regular communication compensating for the absence of casual contact that had occurred when courses were taken together. Additionally, sharing documents offered members a tangible means to discuss their progress or barriers impeding the same.

Furthermore, sharing draft documents at monthly meetings obligated members to remain on task and concretely demonstrate progress. The return for providing such documents such as sample Human Subjects Institute Review Board (H.S.I.R.B.) forms, researcher created instruments, and chapter drafts, was valuable feedback from a sympathetic audience that could recommend modifications to better assure approval by the researcher's dissertation committee.

Two phases seemed most appropriate for sharing material for peer review: (1) approval of the first three chapters (Overview, Methods, and Literature Review) for coherence, integration, and brevity; and (2) mechanisms for collecting, storing, analyzing, and reporting data. Considering these two major tasks, the group was fortunate that it was comprised of a mix of skilled individuals including "numbers crunchers" and excellent technical writers.

Chapters 4 and 5

Through chapters one to three, group members' review and critique of each others' work was quite relevant. However, as one ventured onward with chapters four and five, a sense of "going it alone" began to arise. Each group member gained increasingly more ownership of his or her work. In each case, the researcher and his or her faculty advisor began to stake out the actual breadth of the data analysis required and the language/perspective necessary by which to report findings and conclusions. Group input certainly remained welcome, though others' scope of contribution had significantly diminished, especially as each researcher strove to explicate the most salient insights of his or her work. In retrospect, the process inevitably unfolded in this manner because each researcher incontestably became the expert for his or her own study.

Practice Defense

The culmination of group members' feedback and assistance was nearly complete by the time practice oral dissertation defenses were presented. The presenting group member planned a 20-30 minute defense during which his or her research analyses and interpretations were described and displayed via overhead transparencies (most often through the aid of Microsoft Powerpoint). Following the presentation, group members probed the speaker for clarifications related to such items as: (a) clear definitions of terms, (b) the basis upon which conclusions were reached, (c) the appropriateness of the statistical tests used, or more generally, (d) what next steps the presenter planned to take to disseminate more widely his or her findings.

Celebrating Victories

Individual milestone achievements were regularly celebrated. Major milestones included committee acceptance of one's dissertation proposal, receiving research approval by the university's H.S.I.R.B., permission to schedule one's dissertation defense, and ultimately the Graduate College's acceptance of one's dissertation -- orally defended, reworked for the final time, and ready for binding! Of lesser importance but nevertheless crucial to an approved dissertation was obtaining a respectable survey return rate; successfully "crunching" numbers; and securing a typist/editor to prepare tables, figures, and a bibliography.

In addition to congratulatory e-mail messages and snack treats following regularly scheduled meetings, one highly enjoyable tradition entailed a buffet lunch at a local Chinese restaurant after

successful oral defenses. Group members seated themselves (spouses included) at the same round table for each occasion. This tradition served the newly granted Ed.D. group member the opportunity to express reflective impressions of the oral defense, feelings of personal relief and hope for others, and abundant thanks to each group member in words too few to ever express the true gratitude felt.

REFLECTIONS ON THE EXPERIENCE

At the present date, 50% (3) of the group members have graduated within the first year of the group's formation -- an enviable success rate for many university departments! Benefits derived from membership in a dissertation support group extended far beyond mundane process tips such as reminders of Graduate College due dates, names of able typists/editors, or where to inexpensively make multiple copies of one's dissertation. Membership in a support group made available intellectual and emotional support. Intellectual support involved activities/ideas that enabled group members' steady progress toward the final dissertation product and the competent defense of it. Progress was enhanced through intermittent face-to-face contact at group meetings, frequent e-mail progress reports, and an unwritten commitment to keep on task by sharing documents promised for others' review.

The emotional support generously offered among group members can not be overstated. Since the time of the group's conception, significant life events had occurred for most group members. For example, one member's mother passed away, another member changed professional positions twice, a third member lost employment due to company down sizing, and a fourth relocated his wife and newborn back to his spouse's country of origin. Sharing these life events was a strong reminder of the commitment and sacrifice necessary to obtain a doctorate degree, and that together all could and would

overcome whatever obstacles encountered. Rather than providing members a retreat for tactfully "letting off steam", the group format truly served noble purposes first such as facilitating/promoting recognition of the lasting effect all were contributing to one another's careers/lives. As a group member stated, "I couldn't have finished this degree without the group's help; I will never forget what you have done for me."

Future Steps

Though geographically dispersed, group members who had completed their programs of studies have remained faithful to their promise to actively help every member graduate. E-mail has remained the primary means of communication for weekly reporting, and in fact, has proved a viable tool for international mailings as well.

A final contribution that members of the dissertation support group envisioned was to make available their successful model to other graduate students now approaching A.B.D. status within Western Michigan University's Educational Leadership Department and, more broadly speaking, to students in Colleges of Education wherever they may be located. To enhance student networking and facilite the dissertation process, future support groups might consider creating an e-mail distribution list to include current departmental students who have already enrolled or about to do so in dissertation hours. Efficient reference to contact personnel organizing dissertation support groups could easily (and ideally) be provided on a department's World Wide Web page, or otherwise channeled through a department's/Graduate College's student association.

SUMMARY

The formation of a doctoral dissertation support group can prevent feelings of being overwhelmed, and instead offer valuable material and strategic resources for those pursuing an advanced degree. Doctoral programs are designed for students to collaboratively create a professional product -- a dissertation -- making use of their dissertation committees' expertise and advice. In the spirit of collaborative/collegial work, a dissertation support group can offer systematic assistance to fellow graduate students (beyond their supervising committees' input) by aiding them to remain mentally focussed and physically on task. At Western Michigan University, the structure and activities of a successful dissertation support group were described in this article. One recommendation would call for graduate students in similar circumstances to recreate the Western Michigan University model in their own local contexts and advance a discussion related to enhancing the graduation of education doctoral students in greater numbers from their chosen programs of studies.

APPENDIX 1

Articles of Understanding for Members in the Dissertation Support Group

1. All group members must be provided with detailed abstracts and an approved proposal of everybody's dissertation in progress.

2. If a member intends to discuss specific substantive problems of his/her work that are not explicitly in the abstract or proposal, he/she must provide members in advance with a description and summary of the gist of the problems.

3. All members must make every effort to attend all meetings until his/her graduation. Upon graduation, the member remains invited to attend meetings or may elect to participate through the mail (postal or electronic). However members must be committed to one another until all have graduated.

4. Members must be willing to put forth the necessary time to read, reflect and comment upon other members' dissertation chapters in a timely fashion. The group will be limited to around five members to keep reviewing work at a minimum.

5. The group will meet at least once every three weeks. Agendas for the meetings will be published in advance through e-mail. Individuals encountering specific problems with their dissertation will be able to have ample reporting and reflection time. Members must request time on the agenda. there will normally be one or two main persons on the agenda and minimal time for the others.

6. Weekly progress reports to all members will be given through electronic mail. Questions and concerns can be posted at the end of your report. All members are requested to check their e-mail on a regula basis (at least 2 or 3 times a week).

7. Upon unanimous agreement, the group may invite outsiders to attend a specific meeting (guest speaker or resource people).

8. All along the journey, dissertation victories and "rites of passage" -- such as completion of chapters, defense, etc. will be formally acknowledged and celebrated by the group.

9. All meeting agenda items of a personal or sensitive nature must be kept confidential.

10. The group is founded upon these principles: patience, endurance, and celebration.

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